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Review of: *Sophocles' Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction*. By Frederick Ahl.  
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**Disciplines**

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*Sophocles' Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction.* By FREDERICK AHL. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991. Pp. xii + 297. \$41.50 (cloth), \$12.95 (paper).

The argument of this book is that Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is not about Oedipus' discovery that he has killed his father and married his mother, but rather about Oedipus' unwarranted leap to the conclusion that he has done these things in the face of evidence that is inconclusive and insufficiently examined. While most classicists will want to dismiss this unorthodox thesis as eccentric and absurd, it does deserve to be taken seriously. There is some striking textual evidence to support Ahl's interpretation, and he is not the only critic to advance it. We owe A. a willingness to try to think ourselves out of our inherited vision of this classic work; in turn, we can expect from him answers to two questions: What do we stand to gain by relinquishing our familiar understanding of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* as a play

about the inescapability of fate? And why has almost no one understood the play correctly—by A.'s lights—in the last twenty-five hundred years?

A.'s book has an important precursor in an article by Sandor Goodhart that appeared in *Diacritics* in 1978: "Ἀηστὰς Ἐφάσκε: Oedipus and Laius' Many Murderers." Goodhart concentrates on the most conspicuous flaw in the evidence on which Oedipus convicts himself of the murder of Laius: the discrepancy between the claim of the one surviving witness that Laius was killed by a group of men and the recollection of Oedipus that he was the sole killer of the old man he met on the way from Delphi to Thebes. Sophocles underscores this discrepancy when he has Oedipus, as he waits for that witness to appear, stress to Jocasta his hope that the witness will confirm that the murderers of Laius were many and so will exonerate Oedipus (*OT* 842–47). Yet Oedipus fails to pursue this question when the witness arrives. This is because the intervening visit of the Corinthian messenger has shifted Oedipus' focus to the more pressing question of his own identity; the witness to the murder has become more interesting in his other role as the shepherd who gave the infant raised by Polybus and Merope to the Corinthian.

A. surveys the entire play and finds that, in every episode, Oedipus similarly accepts inadequate evidence against himself without examining it carefully. This epistemological disaster is fostered both by Oedipus' own personality and by the personalities of his informants. Oedipus is obsessed with himself and with his fears about the crimes prophesied for him, while his informants, consistently motivated by self-interest, play on Oedipus' fears to further their own ends. For example, Oedipus unquestioningly accepts the idea that the plague in Thebes is linked to Laius' death even though that is an interpretation advanced by Creon of an oracle for which Creon is the only source. Despite the suspicions of Creon that he later voices, Oedipus fails to notice that Creon is manipulating him as part of a subtle—and successful—plot to become ruler of Thebes.

Similarly, according to A., Oedipus allows Teiresias to stimulate his doubts about his own paternity without presenting any evidence, forgetting that Teiresias may resent him because of his success with the Sphinx. On the basis of what he is told by the Corinthian, Oedipus comes to the consequential conclusion that he is not the son of Polybus but a foundling. Yet the Corinthian contradicts himself, saying at one point that he came upon the infant Oedipus on Mt. Cithaeron (*OT* 1026), but a few lines later that he received him from someone else (*OT* 1038–40). He also contradicts the drinking companion who first raised Oedipus' doubts about this paternity: that man implied Oedipus had been presented to Polybus by Merope (*OT* 782), the Corinthian says that he himself gave him to Polybus (*OT* 1022). And the Corinthian is an unreliable informant because he is openly motivated by the hope of a reward when Oedipus takes over Polybus' throne (*OT* 1005–6) and therefore can be expected to say whatever will lead Oedipus to think it would be safe to return to Corinth.

Oedipus' decision that he is the murderer of Laius and the son of Laius and Jocasta comes in his encounter with the old Theban servant who is both the eyewitness to the murder and the servant to whom Jocasta—as the servant claims (*OT* 1173), but she implies it was Laius (*OT* 717–19)—gave the infant to be exposed. Yet if that servant really did witness the murder, his very existence contradicts

Oedipus' memory that he killed all of the men in the group he encountered; if he did not, his trustworthiness is questionable.

In developing this interpretation, A. makes arguments most of us have been trained to view as illegitimate because they observe no distinction between literature and life. He rejects the principle enunciated in particular by Roland Barthes that the characters in literature must not be treated as if they were real people. He freely attributes to Sophocles' characters experiences that transcend the words of Sophocles' text, asserting, for example, that when Creon says he has no interest in political power he is really thinking the opposite, or that when Creon arouses Oedipus to anger he is deliberately provoking a type of behavior he has witnessed many times in the past.

A. often finds psychological significance in what most critics would class as literary devices. When Oedipus tells the Corinthian messenger about the circumstances of his own departure from Corinth, A. does not see this as an expedient by which Sophocles conveys this information to his audience, but comments that "it is curious that Oedipus so readily accepts the anonymous stranger as confessor here" (p. 170). When Jocasta suggests that Oedipus enter the house, this is not a sign that Sophocles wants to clear the stage for the chorus, but evidence that she feels the need for a private conversation. When the Corinthian answers Oedipus' question about how Polybus died by saying, "a small stroke lays old bodies to rest" (*OT* 961), the generality of his statement is a sign of suspicious equivocation on the speaker's part rather than a feature of Sophoclean style. In general, Sophocles as the poet who shapes an artificial representation of experience tends to disappear from A.'s account to be replaced by wholly autonomous characters.

It is much easier to register unease with these arguments than it is to refute them conclusively. Any coherent understanding of a literary character requires some embroidery on hints given by the text, and it is hard to lay down rules for when to draw the line. Most readers of the play would claim that when Creon says he has never craved power, he should be believed, but that when Oedipus says that he has been suspecting Creon of treachery, he probably should not be believed: he says this in a defensive response to Teiresias' declarations and we certainly should not think he had suspicions that would, as A. would have it, make it notably odd that he sent Creon to Delphi in the first place. And yet it is hard to offer an iron-clad justification for this variable skepticism, which largely stems from the assumption that Creon exists in the play only to further the presentation of Oedipus and therefore is not depicted in the same psychological depth.

Furthermore, embracing logical inconsistencies as a by-product of literariness means finding sloppiness in a play that is regularly praised as a masterwork of accomplished plot construction and renouncing the critical principle that works of literature repay close reading with minute attention to detail. It is not an accident that A.'s closest allies in a way turn out to be scholarly commentators with an eye for textual problems, such as R. C. Jebb and especially R. D. Dawe, who often have noted the same discrepancies, although without drawing the same conclusions. For example, both A. and Dawe note that the text gives confusing information about whether the witness to Laius' death first returned to Thebes immediately after the killing or only after Oedipus had arrived and established himself there. Dawe can only censure this as a flaw in Sophocles' workmanship: "More serious

perhaps than the offence against real life logic is the offence against dramatic likelihood" (R. D. Dawe, ed., "*Oedipus Rex*" [Cambridge, 1982], p. 16); for A., the confusion is a creative way of evoking doubt about the evidence against Oedipus. Because the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is concerned with the detection of crimes, it foregrounds the parallel, which so engaged Aristotle, between the lawyer's task of persuading jurors in a courtroom that something has happened and the poet's task of persuading viewers in a theater that something has happened. A. forces us to consider why we are willing to accept flimsier evidence in viewing a play than we would in judging a trial.

While A.'s method of reading provides a bracing challenge to our familiar critical habits, he is less successful than Goodhart in answering the two questions raised above about what larger purpose this radical rereading might serve and why it has never surfaced before. Drawing on a variety of contemporary theories, most prominently those of Jacques Derrida and René Girard, Goodhart sees both Oedipus and Sophocles' audience as caught up in the "idolatry of the Oedipal perspective," an irrational willingness to understand human actions as shaped by the inevitability of parricide and incest. We all evince a tendency to self-incrimination that leads us to grant authority to pronouncements that these crimes are inevitable: thus Oedipus comes to believe the Delphic oracle, and Sophocles' readers acquiesce in his conclusions because they are motivated by the same impulses. For modern readers this inclination is reinforced by Freudian psychoanalysis, which recapitulates the oracle's pronouncement, now making parricide and incest desires to be found in every psyche rather than the destined actions of a particular individual.

Not only does Goodhart succeed in explaining why Sophocles' audiences have routinely ignored the play's hints that Oedipus is not necessarily guilty, but his position is humane: learning to see our acceptance of the traditional Oedipus myth as idolatry promises to liberate us from a constraining vision of human nature as inescapably criminal. Furthermore, Goodhart, following Girard, identifies the social as well as the psychological forces that help to promote this idolatry: Oedipus' self-incrimination is one example of the scapegoating mechanism through which societies control violence by channelling it against a single victim who is imagined to be more criminal than everyone else. The Girardian dimension of Goodhart's argument is especially appealing because it provides a framework within which the particular discrepancy in the evidence from which Goodhart starts is itself significant: Oedipus' decision that Laius had a single murderer rather than many neatly illustrates the process of scapegoating.

A. is less clear about what the point of adopting this view of the play would be. He seems to think much of the time that Sophocles is portraying Oedipus as a sociopath surrounded by mean-spirited self-seekers with no interest in helping him arrive at the truth. He reads Oedipus through the lens of Plato's descriptions in the *Republic* of dangerously irrational souls, branding him as "egocentric and paranoid; the very embodiment of Plato's tyrannical soul . . ." (p. 262). According to A., Oedipus' egotism can be seen in the way he turns his attention from the problems of Thebes to the question of his own identity; in his inability to recognize that others may have motives that serve their own interests rather than his; and in his inclination to make himself a scapegoat, which stems from a desire for self-aggrandizement. Rather than being admired for his willingness to be punished, he is to be faulted for

abandoning Thebes to the disastrous consequences that follow on his departure. Few readers will feel that this repellent characterization answers to their own experience of the play or that it offers much compensation for the suspension of their usual critical standards.

A. at one point attributes the pervasiveness of the more orthodox interpretation to the undue influence of Seneca's *Oedipus*, but he also claims that we, by believing that Oedipus is correct, are making the same mistake he is and that "perhaps this is precisely the trap into which Sophocles would have us fall" (p. x). But he never develops the implications of our identification with Oedipus in view of his image of Oedipus as representing the extreme negative behavior associated with tyrants. In fact, by portraying Oedipus so negatively for making interpretative errors that most readers of the play replicate, A. seems to be engaging in some unacknowledged scapegoating of his own.

The question of how we are to understand Sophocles' intentions is key to any attempt to assess this approach. Both Goodhart and A. write as if their interpretation describes Sophocles' conscious aims, but it is hard to believe that Sophocles himself really meant to present Oedipus in the *OT* as deluded, despite A.'s reminders that there was wide variation in the presentation of traditional myths in tragedy and that Sophocles lived in a climate of considerable skepticism towards the Delphic oracle. In adducing evidence for Sophocles' intentions, A. never deals with the *Oedipus Coloneus*, which, despite its lateness, clearly looks back to the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. There Sophocles develops a position on Oedipus' past crimes that involves both insisting that they happened and relieving Oedipus of the burden of responsibility for them. This, like Freud's vision of the psychoanalytic cure, is a humane response to Oedipus' situation from within the Oedipal perspective, and it does not square well with an earlier depiction of Oedipus as guilty only in his own imagination. In any case, the *Oedipus Coloneus* surely has played at least as much of a role as Seneca's *Oedipus* in fostering the canonical interpretation of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

The approach of A. and Goodhart would be more fruitful if it were detached from the claim to identify Sophocles' intentions. There is no reason why we cannot include Sophocles among those who have been under the sway of the Oedipal perspective, seeing him, like the Oedipus he created and like Freud who appropriated that Oedipus as a model for the human psyche, as determined to affirm an Oedipal vision. The critic's task would then be to locate the forces that caused Sophocles to leave so many conspicuous loose ends in making his case, whether in the slipperiness of language, as a deconstructionist might, or in the author's unconscious, as a Freudian might.

This approach to the *Oedipus Tyrannus* works best as an instance of the instructive practice of reading texts with a critical rather than an automatically sympathetic attitude towards the author's intentions. If we are going to insist on Sophocles' role in actively shaping the play we have, we should also consider that he did not have to shape it exactly as he did. One of the most eye-opening effects of A.'s book is that it shows us how different the action of the play looks if we focus on the viewpoints of characters other than Oedipus. This allows us to see not what these characters actually experienced, since they really do not exist outside the play, but what vistas Sophocles has attempted to foreclose by directing our attention to one central

character. A. is also excellent at revealing how much the realization of the author's intentions depends on the complicity of his readers. Some of the best moments in the book are those in which he shows how modern translators have misrepresented the literal Greek text in order to help Sophocles convey more clearly what they are sure he meant. Adding this approach to our arsenal of perspectives on the play would not prevent us from attempting to elicit Sophocles' intentions and admiring the skill with which he has fulfilled them, but it could help us to ask whether we have to surrender ourselves to his vision. Through recognizing that the play gives us not only an opportunity to identify with Oedipus' self-conviction, but also an opportunity to see that Oedipus' conclusions are not inescapable, we may be better able to resist a limiting and defeatist view of human possibility.

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